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# Investigating elementary school administrators' and teachers' perceptions on children with autism

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## Abstract

Autism is defined as a pervasive developmental disorder which effects child's communication, social interaction and behaviors. For some individuals oral communication is never established, because they can either not talk or refuse to talk. Education is the only proved way to help autistic individuals to cope with the social world around them. Therefore, there need to be schools, administrators and teachers to educate. The biggest problem about the education of individuals with autism is the lack of awareness in schools. This research study investigates elementary school administrators' and teachers' perceptions on children with autism. Research results indicate present situation in Istanbul.

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**Keywords:** Autism; developmental disorder; special education; teachers' perception; administrators' perception.

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## 1. Introduction

Leo Kanner was the first person who described Autism in detail in 1943. He did his description by after observing similar behaviour patterns in 11 children. He noticed a common "extreme aloneness from the beginning of life and an anxiously obsessive desire for the preservation of sameness". Then, Kanner referred these children as being autistic. In 1911, Eugen Bleuler used the term to refer narrowing of relationships to people and to the outside world. Hans Asperger was another person who worked with autistic children who all had speech. Then he identified his children with the term "Asperger syndrome". There have been several controversies regarding the cause of autism over the years (Joshi, Percy, Brown, 2002). Autism is in the spectrum of Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Deutsch (2002) defines the term Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) as referring to a very heterogeneous group of children who might have difficulties in communication, social relationships, and idiosyncratic interests. Although autism was first described long ago in the world, its diagnosis was in 1980 in Turkey.

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Despite the controversies regarding the cause of autism cited by Joshi and others (2002), there is a common understanding that education is the only way to overcome the problems which individuals with autism are faced with. Therefore; pre-school education at early ages became very important for individuals with autism. Behaviourism should be the underlying approach for this pre-school education. Although there are several research studies on the education of autistic children in our country, there is no written research report includes information about how many children were educated and how much advantage taken from the education mentioned (Darica, Agabeydoglu and Gumuscu, 2005). Educational researchers need to focus on the issue to make the importance of mainstreaming of autistic individuals clear to teachers and administrators. Sometimes individuals with autism may have hyperactivity also. Sometimes autism may be accompanied with some other behavioural problems. In these two cases, child might create some difficulties for friends and alter the learning conditions. Therefore; it is hard for teachers to include this child in class and for administrators it is hard to include this child in school. If teachers and school administrators have adequate understanding about autism and how autistic individuals might behave in certain conditions, they can produce alternative ways to solve in-class problems mentioned above. There is an urgent need to inform teachers and administrators, if they do not have an adequate knowledge and understanding. In order to identify the case in Türkiye, this research study examines the perceptions of elementary school teachers and administrators on children with autism who need special education.

## **2. Method**

Yildirim and Simsek (1999) emphasize the importance of qualitative research method to explain the facts, events and people's beliefs. Based on this emphasis, this research was designed in both quantitative and qualitative manners. Therefore, it is a mixed method design. Consistent with the purpose of the research study, qualitative manner of the study deepens the identification of the case by explanations.

### *2.1. Sampling*

Istanbul has parts in two continents. This research study took place in Anatolian side of Istanbul because the region is easily accessible for the researcher. Since the researcher is working as a teacher in Kadikoy region of Anatolian side, teachers and administrators of the elementary schools in Kadikoy were randomly sampled. Therefore; 117 elementary school teachers and administrators participated in this research study. Sample consisted of 76 females (65%) and 41 males (35%). Distribution of individuals participated in this study according to their age level was as follows: 49 (41.9%) of them were in between ages of 21-40 and 68 (58.1%) of them were in between ages 41- more than 50. Participants also come from different educational backgrounds. 53 (45.3%) participants were graduates of Faculty of Arts and Science, 28 (23.9%) of them were graduates of "Faculty of Education" and lastly, 36 (30.8%) of them were graduates of "Teachers' College" which do not exist with this name anymore.

### *2.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis*

A questionnaire developed by the researchers was used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of twenty three questions. Participants were asked to give some personal information in the first three ones, and other questions were designed to address the participants' perceptions about children with autism. There were some "why" and "how" questions among them to make participants give more and detailed information about their thinking and understanding on the issue. The questionnaire is presented in the appendix 1.

Data collected through the questionnaire mentioned above were analyzed in two parts. SPSS 15.0 was used to make basic statistical analyses of related questions and correlations among them. On the other hand, ten "why" and "how" questions, asked to deepen researchers' understandings about participants' perceptions on children with autism were qualitatively analyzed. Qualitative analyses of these questions were made by using open-coding. Open-coding includes identifying codes, describing categories from these codes, then writing assertions from these categories. Due to some limitations, only some part of these analyses will be presented in the following findings section.

### 3. Findings

Findings of this research study will be displayed in two parts. First part will include statistical analyses of data, whereas the second part presents the assertions generated by the researchers.

#### 3.1. Statistical Analysis

- Regardless of their gender, school of graduation and age level, most of the participants have adequate information about autism. Table 1 represents this situation.

Table 1. Having adequate information about autism and personal information

Personal Information		Do you have adequate information about autism?		Total	
		Yes	No	n	p
Gender	Female	61	15	76	,997
	Male	33	8	28	
School of graduation:	Faculty of Arts& Science	39	14	53	,246
	Faculty of Education	24	4	28	
	Teachers College	31	5	36	
Age level	21-30	12	0	12	,053
	31-40	25	12	37	
	41-50	30	7	37	
	51 and above	27	4	31	
Total for each parameter		94	23	117	

This would be the result of the increasing number of autistic children in our country. Even if teachers do not have an autistic child, or they do not know how to deal with an autistic student in their class, they at least heard about autism.

- Regardless of their gender, school of graduation and age level, the participants find inclusion policy and practice in the elementary school they work, insufficient. Table 2 displays this issue.

Table 2. perceptions on inclusion policy and practice due to personal information

Personal Information		Do you find inclusion policy and practice for autistic children in schools sufficient?		Total	
		Yes	No	n	p
Gender	Female	4	68	72	,900
	Male	2	38	40	
School of graduation	Faculty of Arts & Science	3	49	52	,885
	Faculty of Education	1	27	28	
	Teachers College	2	30	32	
Age level	21-30	0	11	11	,697
	31-40	3	34	37	
	41-50	2	32	34	
	51 and above	1	29	30	
Total for each parameter		6	106	112	

It is a known fact that most families of autistic children face with problems in schooling. Although inclusion seems to be the best way to teach those children, in practice, schools have serious problems about how they can make inclusion work for these children. Participants' perceptions displayed in Table 2 show their awareness about the problem.

- Although participants feel themselves insufficient in teaching and dealing with autistic children, they do not ask for help and in-service training about the subject. Difficulties they perceive in the inclusion practice might be the reason for not dealing with the problem.
- Almost all participants state the necessity of extra payment, if they have an autistic child in their class. Teachers perceive autistic children as extra work then; they believe that extra work needs to be charged with extra money. Shouldn't they ask for in-service training first then for extra money?

### 3.2. Assertions

This section includes the assertions generated from what participants wrote to open-ended questions.

- **Assertion 1: inclusive classes for autistic individuals**

*Elementary school teachers and administrators hold two beliefs about inclusion of autistic individuals at the same time. Although they believe autistic children need to have their special education class, they can not ignore the positive effect of having them in a regular class.*

The assertion implies two-sided effect. Autistic individuals learn from “others” in class, where “others” in class learn from autistics. It would be a good experience to develop awareness about living together, sharing and understanding individual differences.

- **Assertion 2: problems in teaching autistic individuals**

*Elementary school teachers and administrators emphasize the inefficiency of classroom teachers, and based on this, negative attitudes of parents as the biggest problems they faced.*

Teachers' lack of knowledge and practice in teaching autistic individuals cause stress for both teachers and parents. Parents of students who are not autistic may think teachers are working more with the autistic ones and ignore their child. Although it may not be the case, teachers' inefficiency in teaching may lead parents to think in this way.

- **Assertion 3: expectations from Ministry of Education**

*Elementary school teachers and administrators expect Ministry of Education open autistic children education centers and special education classes to ever elementary school.*

There are some schools having this center and special education class but the number of these schools are not enough to attend.

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## Appendix

Some examples from the questionnaire:

1. Do you have adequate information about autism?
2. Do you have an autistic individual either in your family or in your close environment?
3. What do you think about the inclusive education for autistic individuals in elementary schools? Is it sufficient?
4. Did you have any autistic student in your class?
5. Do you feel confidence to teach an autistic child in your class?
9. Did you attend any in-service training course to learn how to teach an autistic child?
12. What are your expectations from the Ministry of education for autistic individuals?
13. What is your idea about including an autistic child in a regular class? Do they need to have a special education class?
17. If the Ministry of Education makes an extra payment for each autistic child in your class, would that change your perceptions and attitudes about having them in your class?